

# **The Stockton Record**

## **Call for building more prisons**

By Hank Shaw  
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Feb. 6--FOLSOM -- Assembly Republicans accused the Democrats who control the Legislature of delaying any attempt to reform the state's dysfunctional prison system in order to let the federal government take over and release felons onto California's streets.

Using the 117-year-old Folsom State Prison as a backdrop, 27 of the 32 Assembly Republicans said on Monday the Legislature must build more prisons to ease the overcrowding in state prisons.

"The easy answer is, 'let's just let non-violent offenders out early,' " Assembly Minority Leader Mike Villines of Clovis said. "But that is a bad answer."

Villines said Republicans are receptive to the various rehabilitation programs many Democrats are proposing but said the state must also build new prisons.

"It's got to be part of the solution," Villines said.

California's prison system is in crisis. Overcrowding, poor health care and a tangled mess of state sentencing laws have led to increased inmate violence and has swamped rehabilitation programs. A federal judge has taken over the prison health-care system; unless the state gets a grip on the situation the feds could do the same to the whole department.

Prison overcrowding has been a touchy subject in San Joaquin County: Last year Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger tried to convert the old Stockton women's prison into a men's facility -- which met with virulent opposition in the community -- while in Tracy, the Deuel Vocational Institute has become so overcrowded it hasn't been able to do any real vocational rehabilitation for years.

Overcrowding at the Mule Creek prison in Amador County is straining community services in Ione, and Schwarzenegger's administration has been eyeing the women's prison in Chowchilla as a possible men's facility, too.

Absent from Monday's news conference were all three of San Joaquin County's Republican assemblymen, including the Assembly Public Safety Committee's ranking Republican, Stockton's Greg Aghazarian.

Assemblyman Tom Berryhill, a Modesto Republican whose district includes both the Mother Lode and Chowchilla, did attend.

Calls to Aghazarian and Berryhill on Monday were not returned.

Orange County Assemblyman Todd Spitzer said Californians need to pressure the Legislature about building more prisons because the alternative is releasing felons early.

"I personally want people to be scared, because that's going to motivate people to talk about this issue and act," said Spitzer, whom Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez booted off the Public Safety Committee for calling it "pro-criminal."

Spitzer and Villines say the Democrats' move to create a new commission to review California's prison sentencing guidelines -- something which has worked with some success in other states -- is merely a smokescreen for scuttling the "three strikes" law.

"We're not going to coddle prisoners in the state of California," Spitzer said. "The only thing the Democrats have put on the table is a sentencing commission, and that's not acceptable."

State Sen. Michael Machado, D-Linden, said the Legislature is taking a comprehensive look at Schwarzenegger's latest reform proposal. Machado will be leading a hearing on the prison health-care troubles Wednesday.

Machado said he understands his Republican colleagues' feelings.

"I think the Republicans are expressing the frustration that everyone is expressing about the problems in this system," he said.

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